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## Working with Preschool Children

Exploring ways to support learning for three- and four-year-old children

By Judith Gold, Bank Street College of Education & Akimi Gibson, Early Childhood Specialist

In her book, *Mollie is Three*, author and teacher Vivian Gussin Paley captures the voices of preschool children. Listen ...

*"How old are you, Mollie?" Erik asks ...*

*"I'm almost four."*

*"Are you three?"*

*"I'm almost four."*

*"How old are you?"*

*"Four."*

*"Well, I'm four and three-quarters,"*

*Erik says.*

*"Ask me, Erik," Christopher begs. "Ask me that."*

*"How old are you?"*

*"Four on my cake."*

*"How old are you now?"*

*"Three."*

*"Who's older, teacher? Mollie or Christopher?"*

*"They're the same age."*

*"Mollie has to be older. She's four, and he's three."*

*"Mollie calls herself four."*

*"Tell me the truth, Mollie, or you're never coming to my house. How old are you now?"*

*"Three."*

*"You could call yourself three and a half, Mollie," I suggest.*

*"I'm three and a half."*

*"Can I come to your birthday, Mollie?"*

*Christopher asks.*

*"Everyone in this place can come, because everyone is my friend."*

*"Am I, Mollie?"*

*"You are, Christopher."*

(p. 133-134)

Welcome to the world of preschoolers, a dynamic and important learning time in the lives of children. This article is written for program coordinators and volunteer tutors. You'll find key research followed by tips for applying that research. Our goal is to provide ways your preschool, family literacy, or parent education program can effectively support teachers, parents, families, and young children. The content centers around four major areas of learning and literacy growth during the preschool years. Read on to learn more about:

- The developmental nature of three- and four-year-old children
- The support that families provide in early literacy learning
- How children develop as readers and writers
- How to create a rich learning environment

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## How do three- and four-year-old children learn and develop?

**What the research tells us.** Three- and four-year-old children are explorers, constantly on the move, with little time or inclination to learn by sitting and passively listening. To effectively support the social, intellectual, emotional, and physical growth of three- and four-year-olds, adults must enter into their world. Although there are no hard and fast rules, research offers helpful guidelines about child development. Development occurs over time, stages overlap, and no two children are exactly alike. Both development and learning are shaped by the cultural practices of one's family and community (Morrow, 1993).

Understanding how children “catch sense” of their world enables tutors to plan and create exciting learning environments. This understanding can be gained by observing, listening, and talking with each child as a unique individual. Observations of young children reveal that preschoolers:

- Learn through their senses. They are active learners who experience the world around them through touch, taste, sound, smell, and sight.
- Have limited attention spans and low tolerance for sitting.
- Learn best from first-hand discovery and not by being told.
- Learn through their interactions with the adults and other children at home and school and through the materials in their environment.
- Learn through dramatic play.
- Have vivid imaginations. They are magical thinkers who, at times, genuinely confuse fantasy and reality.

**Applying the research.** Young children have a wide variety of experiences and knowledge about themselves and the world around them. As you tutor a child, the work will be most rewarding when you discover who the child is and what com-

petencies the child already demonstrates.

One important way children grow as learners is through play itself. For preschool children, dramatic play has a number of benefits directly tied to learning literacy skills.

- Dramatic play helps children try out different ways of being. Watch them as they take on the roles of mother, father, teacher, firefighter, baby, and grandparent. In trying out these roles, children are working to understand the adult world around them.
- Dramatic play gives children a way to resolve feelings they may not be able to articulate. In dramatic play, the children are in charge. Listen as they negotiate who is going to be the mother or the baby. Consider how much language development is happening as children respond to each other and work out the details of the play. Hear them mimic the actual voices of adults in their lives!
- Dramatic play stimulates intellectual growth. For instance, children are using symbols as they declare that this block will be the baby's bottle or this piece of rug can be a blanket. This process of symbolization—allowing one thing to stand for another—lays the foundation for mastery of written and numeric symbols.

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## How can you help bridge home and school settings?

**What the research tells us.** When children enter preschool settings, they have learned many literacy skills. However, home literacy is often different from school-setting literacy. Home literacy is embedded in the daily lives of families. Reading the bus schedule, making shopping lists, writing addresses on envelopes, and reading television program guides are all examples of literacy events in the home. While children's roles in literacy events vary from home to home, studies demonstrate how literacy skills are involved (Morrow, 1993). Connecting children's prior knowledge with classroom learning and understanding the literacy environments of children from diverse cultures can help you become more responsive to children's differing needs.

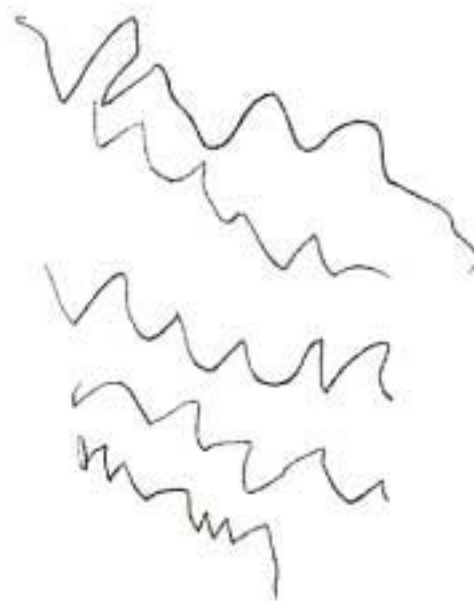
**Applying the research.** A learning environment that celebrates the strengths of each child and each child's family fosters collaboration among children and makes it possible for all parents to become involved in their children's learning in school. As tutors and program coordinators, you can recognize the strengths of different families and build your program around them. For example, when working with an English-language learner, you can begin by asking the child to teach you some words in her native language. "Great!" the tutor might say. "You know a language that I can't speak. So you can be my tutor, too."

All families contribute to the literacy development of their children. It's important to recognize that families can be rich in literacy even if they aren't rich in books. Many children come to school having actively listened to stories told to them by grandmothers, uncles, and other relatives or elders. Tutors can use the power of oral storytelling to introduce these children to the world of books.

## How do young children learn to read and write?

**What the research tells us.** Literacy development requires both informal and formal adult guidance and instruction. Recent studies provide a wealth of information about how children develop as readers and writers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The foundation for successful literacy development is established before children enter the formal learning environment of kindergarten and first grade. Learning to read and write occurs along a developmental continuum with no set beginning or end points. While literacy skills and abilities develop over a lifetime, the early years are most critical. A major goal during preschool years is to enhance children's exposure to concepts of print by writing for them, with them, and to them.

Children begin to develop as readers and writers by understanding and mimicking basic concepts. For example, a preschooler's drawing and markings on paper may not appear to be conventional writing, but those markings are an important and necessary beginning.



**Chantelle, three years old, wrote a list of things she wanted for her birthday.**

**Responsive tutoring builds on children's knowledge, strengths, and interests.**

Children use all forms of language—speaking, listening, pictures, print, and images—to communicate their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. They build on their oral language to learn about written language. Early experiences with oral and written language—as well as with adults and peers—provide children with a rich foundation to begin to read words, understand how letters and sounds go together, and acquire knowledge about the English language system. Children's abilities during the preschool years are described in a 1988 joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Examples of what young children can do include:

- Listening to and discussing books
- Understanding that print carries a message
- Engaging in reading and writing attempts
- Identifying labels and signs in their environment
- Participating in rhyming games
- Identifying some letters and making letter-sound matches
- Using known letters or approximations of letters to represent written language (especially meaningful words, names, and phrases)

**Applying the research.** Literacy development requires consistent and dynamic interactions with print and language. Tutors can organize opportunities for play to ensure that reading and writing materials are available for all children. For example, as children construct their version of a restaurant using blocks, their tutor suggests that they make menus and signs. Using a variety of techniques and creative methods helps tutors meet a wide range of children's needs. Responsive tutoring builds on children's knowledge, strengths, and interests.

The IRA and NAEYC position statement also describes the type of language-rich opportunities that support young children's ability to learn to read and write. These opportunities include:

- Sharing books with children to model reading behaviors
- Talking about letters by name and sounds
- Rereading favorite stories
- Engaging children in language games
- Promoting literacy-related play activities
- Encouraging children to experiment with writing

Of this list, reading aloud is the single most important activity for building the understandings and skills essential for reading success.





## What does a quality learning environment look like for three- and four-year-olds?

**What the research tells us.** Whether your work focuses on parent education classes or family literacy programs, tutors share a common goal: to help every child become a successful reader. This support begins with understanding the child's needs and creating an environment that fosters learning. Research reveals that powerful curriculum is child-centered (Bredekamp, 1987.) Child-centered classrooms align with social, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs. Effective work with young children supports the developing skills of the individual child. In this way, tutors can act as coaches, making the individual child feel motivated, confident, and positive about learning. High-quality pre-school settings focus on the learning of literacy rather than the teaching of literacy.

**Applying the research.** Young children need space that supports their learning styles and recognizes their need to move around. The physical environment should allow children to work in whole groups, small groups, and individually. Children this age love to move and sing. They are intensely curious about how things work and love to conduct science experiments, care for and study living animals, cook, and learn about their fellow classmates and their families. These intrinsically motivating interests provide you with a wealth of information from which you can base your work. As a tutor, you can encourage children to choose activities they like and help them develop a range of interests.

The following additional tips can help you create lively centers and sessions for preschool children.

**Provide a variety of materials.** A rich learning environment enables children to work with all kinds of materials. Materials that allow for open-ended exploration include: unit blocks, hollow blocks, art materials, water, clay, play dough, and sand. These materials encourage children to create and solve problems. "If the building crashes, what can I do to make it balance?" "Why do some things float and others sink?" "How can I get the water to flow in this tube?" Materials that support and extend dramatic play include: a wide spectrum of work clothes, different types of dolls, wooden animals, and transportation toys. The outdoor environment is also a crucial part of the day. Equipment such as building blocks, climbing apparatus, and riding vehicles foster muscle coordination and large motor development.

**Offer opportunities for both open-ended exploration and formal learning.** Many tutors find that the more open-ended the material, the more creative children become. In one center, a parent brought in pieces of fabric for the dramatic play area that the children turned into fanciful costumes. In contrast, puzzles and geometric shapes are examples of materials that are more closed or formal. Children work more effectively when they can explore their ideas about using new materials before they are asked to use them in a formal way. (And sometimes children mix the two, using math materials to build structures or decorate their block buildings.)

**Create print-rich environments.** Put yourself at the child's eye level and look around the room. Can you see print, images, and information? In setting up a family literacy or preschool center, post children's names on attendance charts and cubbies and provide labels throughout the room. If you have samples, display song and poem charts as well as children's art work and dictated writings.

Children's own language, traditional rhymes, and songs provide children with a wealth of opportunities to learn how language works.

**Read aloud to model reading.** Reading aloud cannot be emphasized enough. When you read aloud in your tutoring time, you are modeling what confident and expert reading sounds like. Children learn about books and how to use them, tracking print from left to right, top to bottom, and front to back. Reading aloud also gives children opportunities to hear new words and understand their meanings. Read favorite children's books and classics, including multicultural stories and stories that reflect children's own lives and experiences. As active listeners, children observe how adults deliver stories. Try switching voices for different characters or using gestures to underscore the mood. Dramatic reading supports children's social and emotional development as well.

**Share writing as a model for writing.** If you encourage and accept young children's writing and drawings, you'll find that they feel encouraged to do better and learn more. Writing, including invented and beginning spellings, can be a vital part of each child's day. When children dictate their stories and experiences to you, they also develop oral language skills. Weave reading and writing into all activities. You can also engage preschoolers in writing for functional purposes such as making chore lists, book lists, and notes. Bring in interesting writing supplies for children to use

during your time with them, including folders, paper in eye-catching colors, and a variety of alluring markers, crayons, and pencils.

**Develop children's oral language.** Children's own language, traditional rhymes, and songs provide children with a wealth of opportunities to learn how language works. Listening for words that rhyme is a good way to develop phonological awareness—the ability to understand that speech is composed of identifiable sounds. Songs and rhymes help children develop the ability to hear sounds in words and repeat them. They can use these sounds as the basis for invented or phonetic spelling.



David, four years old, asked his teacher to post a note he wrote on the notice board to remind him that "the banana bread is in the cubby."

### Some final thoughts

Children count on adults to be there to mediate their disputes, to listen to them talk about their work, and to encourage and extend their thinking. Young children benefit most from small group or individual interactions. As a tutor, you are an invaluable resource for meeting the individual needs of children. While observing dramatic play, for example, you might notice that children are continually building fire stations with blocks. This observation could lead to a trip to a fire station. You might go to the library and take out books on firefighters and read them to this group of children. Or you might notice that the children are working hard to create a hose for their fire truck. You can help them to choose what material can be used to create it.

Children like to be asked about their paintings, drawings, and collages. A simple, "Tell me about your painting," can elicit a detailed story about going bike riding and falling down. A representation of friends playing on a jungle gym may not be obvious to you, but it is to the child who drew it. To refine and develop language, children need to be given opportunities to express themselves in many different settings.

Whether you collect materials and work with children to make collages, plan a cooking activity and prepare a recipe with pictures and words, or play clapping games with a small group, every activity contributes to language development and literacy learning for young children. It may not always look like the kind of literacy work that you are most familiar with, but it is the foundation on which later work is built. Remember that reading is a social activity and is a language-based skill. Enjoy the language of preschoolers and their social activity. It's an engaging world.



**In child-centered classrooms, children are given the freedom and support to write and spell words by listening to the sounds in the words. Kara, four years old, adds a page to her story. She writes, "She was a new girl in the classroom."**



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LEARNS at the  
Northwest Regional  
Educational Laboratory  
101 SW Main Street,  
Suite 500  
Portland, OR 97204  
Toll-free phone:  
1-800-361-7890  
Fax: (503) 275-0133  
Web: [www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org)  
E-mail: [learns@nwrel.org](mailto:learns@nwrel.org)



LEARNS at the  
Bank Street College  
of Education  
610 West 112th Street  
New York, NY 10025  
Toll-free phone:  
1-800-930-5664  
Fax: (212) 875-4547  
Web: [www.bnkst.edu](http://www.bnkst.edu)  
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